DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 122 792 IR 003 409

AUTHOR Gorney, Roderic; Steele, Gary
TITLE The Mass Media of Entertainment and Human Survival.
PUB DATE 76
NOTE 13p.; For related documents see IR 003 271 and IR 003 407-408

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Behavior Change; Behavior Development; Broadcast Industry; *Changing Attitudes; Childhood Attitudes; *Democratic Values; Futures (of Society); Information Dissemination; Majority Attitudes; *Mass Media; *Media Research; Moral Development; Programing (Broadcast); Propaganda; *Social Attitudes; Social Behavior; Values
IDENTIFIERS Entertainment (Mass Media)

ABSTRACT

Urgently needed for human survival is a means of influencing large numbers of people to put into rapid action measures which could neutralize such menances as pollution, overpopulation, and violence. Though the cumulative effect of the mass media is not fully established, media entertainment may be the most influential institution in our society. To avoid the spector of censorship, the media would be best controlled through a systematic and open discussion of the social impact of media presentations conducted by media experts and by interested citizens. This action would result in full, advance disclosure of assumptions, attitudes, and values built into mass entertainment. (EMH)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

ED122792

THE MASS MEDIA OF ENTERTAINMENT AND HUMAN SURVIVAL

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

Roderic Gorney, M.D.
Gary Steele, M.A., C. Phil

IR003409

INTRODUCTION: Urgently needed for human survival is a means of influencing large numbers of people to put into rapid action those measures which could neutralize such menaces as pollution, overpopulation, and violence. The long-term goal of our research is elucidation of the possible role of the mass media of entertainment in meeting this need. The purpose of this paper is twofold: (1) to present our preliminary appraisal of this possibility and (2) to propose a plan whereby mass entertainment could do this while its freedom is increased and enhanced despite an atmosphere increasingly conducive to censorship. We propose integrated explorations of the impact of the mass media of entertainment on attitudes, values, and behavior, bringing coherence into existent scattered information.

REVIEW OF PERTINENT INFORMATION: Today's entertainment media have added to the ancient Roman function of diversion the deliberate inculcation in enormous audiences of attitudes, values, and behavior that someone finds desirable. Large sums have changed hands to have leading characters in movies or television series smoke cigarettes or drive a particular automobile. These are entertainment features, not commercial messages. But sales results leave no doubt in the "sponsor's" mind as to the effectiveness of his covert advertising. Curiously, professionals in motion pictures and television often deny that their product changes audiences, insisting that their creations act merely as diversions.(1)

Little systematic research has been done to elucidate what effects mass entertainment produces, or how such effects are achieved.(2) Almost nothing is known about how to use such a powerful modality to influence deliberately the attitudes, values, and behavior of people concerning problems which directly threaten survival of the human species. Lack of precise information has not stopped efforts to exploit such uses of mass entertainment. From the Nazi spectacle, "Triumph of the Will," to the American army training films, "Why We Fight", and the current television series, "All in the Family," the assumption is made that the impact of mass entertainment is enormous. So pervasive have the media become that one commentator has proposed that low levels of media use be considered as deviant behavior, citing empirical associations between low levels

of media use "and other acknowledged 'deviant' states..."[3]

Students of mass communication bemoan the lack of "conceptual coherence" characterizing their research.[4] Futhermore, research results often are contradictory and unreplicable.[4] For example, a large body of evidence casts doubt upon the "catharsis" theory of the impact of violence in the mass media.[2,4,5,6] However, Feshbach's field study, one of the few attempting to measure cumulative effects, turned up results tending to support that theory. Subjects exposed to television violence over a period of time exhibited less aggression than did subjects not exposed to television violence, and those who were initially the most aggressive showed the most marked decrease in aggressive behavior.[7] On the other hand, laboratory studies, such as those by Bandura and by Berkowitz, assert that children (appropriately predisposed) can be stimulated to aggressive behavior by watching aggressive behavior.[5,6] Joseph Morgenstern asserts that "Supporting documents from the Report to the Surgeon General...give us the strongest suggestions to date that violent TV programs can have harmful effects on large groups of normal kids." He quotes two scientists:"I believe that the most reasonable conclusion is that there is a link between televised violence and aggressive behavior for the majority of normal children," and, "Now we can see that there is a significant causal relationship."[8]

Research designed to examine cumulative or long-term effects of repeated exposure to the media is specially scarce. The few long-term field studies yielded different and/or more unexpected results than the laboratory experiments. Feshbach's study is one example. Another is the Hovland study, which found that World War II Army training films sometimes had the opposite rather than the desired effects on subjects' attitudes, and that there were delayed "sleeper" effects that sometimes did not become apparent for several months.[9] DeFleur cites two field studies which had exactly opposite results with respect to the degree of fear aroused by a message and the degrees of compliance with its recommendation.[10]

Hovland's results support a major assumption of ours, that the media affect attitude and value changes also in adults. But most of the work on media effect

has focused on children and adolescents on the reasonable assumption that they are much more likely than adults to be influenced in important ways. The first extensive investigations of media effects, the Payne Fund studies of the early 1930's, were "especially concerned with the effects of motion pictures on children".[1] Forty years later, it was 7,000 children on whom were obtained the data included in the Surgeon-General's report on the effects of television violence.[11] We suggest that a similar modern consideration of the effects of the mass entertainment media on adult attitudes, values, and behavior is much needed and long overdue.

> An example of pertinent research designed by the authors is a pilot study utilizing 60 adult subjects randomly selected from a pool of 200 and divided into two matched samples which will be exposed to entertainment films embodying opposing values. An attitude/value survey instrument will be administered before, immediately after, one week after, and one month after the stimulus. In addition, measures of physiologic response (GSR) and behavioral response to frustration will be made. We hypothesize that a divergence in professed attitudes, values, and behavior will occur between the two groups, decreasing with time elapsed after the film-viewing stimulus. A preliminary questionnaire will gather demographic and media-use information about subjects, to be correlated with attitude/value measurements along six dimensions: relationships between the sexes; relationships among the races; rights of property vs. rights of human beings; material aggrandizement vs. psychosocial attainment; human cooperation vs. human competition; violence: acceptance vs. abhorrence. Factor analysis of the correlation matrix for the items in our basal measurements, mean attitude/value index score comparisons over time, and analysis of variance for demographic and media-use variables will be performed. The full results and details of this study, part of a comprehensive research program, will be published when completed.

DIMENSIONS AND IMPACT OF MASS ENTERTAINMENT: The old standbyes for changing human behavior are coercion,rejected in principle because it is always undemocratic, and education, rejected despite principle because it is so often uninteresting. For today's challenge we need a device that is neither dictatorial nor dull. And that device is--entertainment.

Each night 75 million Americans eagerly expose themselves to television entertainment. Each week 40 million Americans view entertainment motion pictures. Every month well over a billion human beings around the world are influenced by such experiences.[12,13] No educational program, no periodical, no book except the Bible ever commands more than a fraction of that audience. Why?

Fundamental to the overwhelming popularity of mass entertainment is its relationship to fantasy. Probably on this account, 60% of a survey's respondents

named television as the innovation which during the previous 25 years had made life more 'enjoyable, pleasant, and interesting'."(10) For most people fantasy is their most precious source of pleasure, a solace without which the often long, hard hours of tedium would be unbearable. Mass communication with other content may provide information which can be used (with effort and concentration) to suppress fantasies for a time. Entertainment, in contrast, coaxes fantasies into the open, honors them, feeds them, and gives them back to us refurbished. Therefore information, attitudes, or values traveling on the vehicle of entertainment bypass usual obstacles to the personality. There, depending on whether or not they help or hinder ability to master reality, they contribute to human safety or peril. The intrepid rescues, peaceful reconciliations, and humor depicted in some television shows, and imitated in life, should give us as much pause as the muggings, murders, and hijackings replicated from others.

THE THREAT FROM--AND TO--MASS ENTERTAINMENT: Notwithstanding its two-edged nature, mass entertainment in terms of social impact is perceived most often as a menace. Despite the paucity of hard data on adults, as each new generation of sexcapades or cinemurders ascends the screen, demands for censorship as society's defense against dangerous entertainment become more strident. Creators of entertainment fight it as an attack upon constitutional freedoms. Many of the rest of us also oppose censorship because through its substitution of tyranny for free exchange of thought, it is a malignant threat to society. At minimum, censorship infantilizes people by depriving them of responsibility. Psychoanalyst Aaron Stern, director of the Motion Picture Association of America's rating system, considers the threat so real that he implements the present system he himself disdains because presumably it staves off outright censorship. In his view, the proper function of a rating system would be "to inform but not restrict." He believes that the present rating system is itself a partial restriction and therefore "a constrictive, evil force." His recommendation is that we should"...invite the audience to make a choice. Let people decide whether they want to be exposed to it." He adds, "If you can come up with a better thing I can do to fight censorship, you have my word: I will leave this and do that."(14)

We offer here a plan which we believe is a "better thing" in that it would not only inform more effectively and stave off censorship, but also would foster maturity by broadening the individual's participation in shaping his own personality.

"TRUTH IN ENTERTAINMENT": We acknowledge in advance that implementation of such a program involves practical difficulties impossible to resolve here. Nevertheless, the urgency of the problem is a compelling reason for presenting a preliminary proposal that might work.

Had the providers of loans voluntarily adopted the principle of "truth in lending", it would not have become necessary for government to impose it by law. We suggest that the mass entertainment industry obviate the possibility of government censorship by voluntarily adopting the parallel principle of "truth in entertainment." This principle requires advance disclosure in the public media by its creators of the formative influences built into mass entertainment. These influences would of course include payments accepted for representing or excluding any element from the product, but would focus upon the assumptions, the attitudes and values, upon which it is founded. In addition, representatives of opposing viewpoints would be given equal opportunity to present their positions.*

What are the advantages of such a plan?

First, the public would have currently unavailable access to advance warning concerning crucial aspects of entertainment. Second, tremendous attention and interest would be drawn to entertainments as their social consequences were debated. In evaluating opinions of the creators and their refuters, many would be stimulated not only to select more discriminatingly the entertainments to which they wish to be exposed, but no doubt would be drawn into the debate with friends, co-workers, and via letters to the "Truth in Entertainment" (TIE) editor. Third, increased awareness of the importance of entertainment would help a wider spectrum of opinion and creative expression to find an audience, and would stimulate some to deliberately sample entertainments with points of view they might otherwise never have encountered

* We realize, of course that there can be no "truth" in this area comparable to the precision possible in "truth in lending" procedures.

or understood. The total effect could be that the public would seize hold of and use for their advancement the craving for entertainment which now leads so many to uncritical acceptance, enraged rejection, or just uninformed indifference to this vital influence in modern life.

Such discussions would revolve not about the plot or the artistic merit of a given entertainment, but rather around its theme, its message, its view of human nature, its differential punishment or reward of certain attitudes and values, its salutary or destructive social consequences.

Objections might be of two sorts--those based on feasibility and those stemming from doubts as to the desirability of such a procedure.

Such a scheme would be expensive. Several hundred mass entertainment films are released in the United States each year.(12) If, for example, each film, TV series, or TV special were alloted one thousand words on the TIE page, to be divided equally between proponents and opponents, about one and a half newspaper column lengths and six minutes of broadcast time would be needed for each program under review. A requirement that each offering be discussed three times in the month prior to release and six times in the two months after release would necessitate a total of three newspaper pages and seventy-five minutes of broadcast time daily. However, the discussions could be divided among the available media. A major metropolitan area may have anywhere from ten to fifty radio and television stations; divided among them, the daily time allotment becomes much more tolerable. Newspaper space could be spread over the several print media that serve most areas. In the case of a continuing television series, the program could be evaluated at intervals, for instance three times a year. Other types of programs--sports, cartoons, daytime soap operas--could be given the same sort of periodic review. If a system were devised that would divide the expense between taxpayers, producers, exhibitors, and media, it should be moderate, and in view of the social benefits, an economical means of enriching national life.

Another feasibility objection derives from possible shortage of "qualified" commentators. However, it could be turned to advantage by enlisting non-specialist

members of the audience to discuss programs. One might eagerly anticipate comments from children regarding the values implicit in the behavior of Bullwinkle or Wile E. Coyote.

Objections as to desirablility of the scheme are less subject to a dollars-and-cents analysis, but some will be equally challenging. The first might be that, despite good intentions in our search for "truth" in entertainment, we are likely to be offered statements characterized by varying but probably incomplete degrees of candor. Even should the creator give us uncensored his best conscious judgment of the values and attitudes implicit in his work, one must admit that often he is the least likely to know explicitly what they are. In 1947, thirty-two years after Birth of a Nation was made, D.W. Griffith said:

> "I am not now and never have been 'anti-Negro' or 'anti' any other race. My attitude towards Negroes has always been one of affection and brotherly feeling....In filming 'The Birth of a Nation,' I gave to my best knowledge the proven facts, and presented the known truth, about the reconstruction period in the American South." (1)

Assuming that Griffith reported truthfully, the film nevertheless did promulgate unfavorable attitudes toward Negroes.(1) Had TIE been in operation when it was released the resultant more enlightening debate could somewhat have neutralized its effects, whether or not these were consciously intended. Moreover, after 60 years of such discussions we might not now be faced with the grim threat of censorship.

Sometimes the conflict between professed and underlying values comes remarkably close to the surface. Sam Peckinpah, whose reputation increasingly centers upon his celebration of violence, can claim to be sickened by the effect of his film, The Wild Bunch, in evoking combat eagerness from a regiment of Nigerian soldiers, and then not only enthusiastically praise Robert Ardrey's "great books", which "acknowledge the animal nature of man" (15,16) (meaning that humans are instinctually aggressive), but go on to produce still bloodier entertainments.

In evaluating the benefits of disclosure, however naive, muddied, or seemingly hypocritical, we must remember that even this sort of self-evaluation is better than no evaluation at all. For at least the public could learn the artist's own conception, or at least public pronouncement, of what he is doing. And there is always the counter-apologia to provide illumination. If a filmmaker maintains

that he offers no message and merely amuses, then that too is noteworthy.

Another likely objection is that entertainment critics already present the kind of evaluation we are suggesting. Reviews, however, generally do not address themselves to the basic attitudes and values of the work. Many critics take pride in restricting themselves to the question of how well a work achieves the goals chosen by its creators and not at all to judgment on the social benefit or toxicity of the goals themselves. Insofar as there may be said to be a critical ethos at all, it is to keep the critic's or anyone else's social values out of the judging processes. The fact that an occasional film does move critics to transcend their self-imposed limitations--the recent controversies over Straw Dogs and A Clockwork Orange are examples--only points up the usual procedure. And even in a climate of concern over movie and television violence, there are dozens of films such as Dirty Harry and The French Connection which escape such discussions. Ordinarily the only film which occasions a search for underlying attitudes and values is the offering from a noted foreign director. Thus, a critic will occasionally devote a column to Antonioni's anomie or Fellini's fantasies. Products of our own culture, however, do not often stimulate such reflections.

As an example, consider the following statements: "Everybody loves a good chase scene in a movie", and "Chases have always fascinated people..." One is from a review of a French film, The Burglar, in an "underground" newspaper,(17) supposedly the kind of institution devoted to critically examining rather than just echoing establishment values. The other is from a Los Angeles Times article questioning whether highspeed police chases are worth the risk involved.(18) Here the film critic and the newswriter unquestioningly elevate an established principle of film art into a general observation on human nature, ironically at the moment that this particular value was coming under attack by the establishment's Police Department. One function of our proposed review system would be to raise in advance of an entertainment's general release questions as to whether such filmic standards contribute to or detract from reasonable standards of human well-being.

Finally, despite the clamor for censorship there is the question of whether

the public might be indifferent to such an innovation. We think not. There is a rising tide of concern over the messages in our media. It often takes only the slightest direction of attention to the matter to engross the previously unaware person with the attitudes and values of a mass entertainment. An example is the 28-year-old pediatrician who, although initially exultant over the "suspense" in The French Connection's chase sequence, when mildly asked, "What is the film's message?", suddenly launched into an attack on cops (and movies glorifying them) who love chasing crooks more than protecting innocent bystanders.

Examples of concern about other forms of mass communication are also plentiful: An eleven-year-old girl testified before a U.S. Senate Subcommittee on her research on 3,000 children which indicates that TV commercials are deceptive and dangerous.(19) In another state fourteen fifth-graders engaged an attorney to represent them before the Federal Communications Commission in their demand that the license renewals of two TV stations be denied on the grounds that they broadcast deceptive and fraudulent commercials.(20) And there is the fact that public pressure forced a reluctant movie industry to adopt a rating system that even its director deplores.

What we are advocating is a mechanism that will allow us to put the mass media of entertainment into the service of survival without destroying freedom of expression. Indeed, by creating a procedure for open discussion of the attitudes and values represented in entertainment, we believe that public interest in it will be revived and sustained, to general public--and private--profit. The last wave two decades ago of intensive concern with "message" in the media resulted in outcries about "subversion" with associated injustices and peril to constitutional freedoms which stopped just short of censorship. We hope that adoption of our suggestion could result instead in a fruitful, just, and democratic process of public concern with social effects of entertainment.

SUMMING UP: As an alternative to widely advocated censorship, we should consider instituting voluntarily a system of full advance disclosure of the assumptions, attitudes, and values built into mass entertainment. Some will object as

vociferously to deliberate use of entertainment to promote human survival as they do to its present-day devious exploitation to sell products. They may be equally put off by our suggestion. We ask readers to remember that an ominous alternative to our proposal is the tip-toe tyranny represented by various permutations of "Skinnerian" behavior control. From subliminal advertising to comprehensive design by experts of "the contingencies of reinforcement" encountered by a human being from birth on--the ultimate in censorship--all take away from the individual adult the exercise of mature responsiblility for the directions in which he allows himself further to be shaped. In contrast, the deliberate and overt deployment of mass entertainment, fully disclosed in advance, returns to him the discretionary choice over which powerful influences he prefers to subject himself. Under such circumstances, entertainment becomes an unexplored resource for deliberate expansion of human freedom and dignity.

Skinner denies the existence of real freedom and considers "persuasion" and other cognitive measures to change minds as merely "ineffective" means of behavior control.(21) If contempt for the possibility of conscious human decision to change oneself is the alternative, the conscious and fully disclosed deployment of mass media of entertainment becomes even more attractive.

REFERENCES

1. Fearing F.: Influence of the movies on attitudes and behavior. Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 254: 70-79, 1947.
2. Weiss W.: Effects of the mass media of communication, in Handbook of Social Psychology, second edition, Vol 5. Edited by Lindzey G. and Aronson E. Reading, Mass., Addison-Wesley, 1969, pp. 77-195.
3. McQuail D.: Toward a Sociology of Mass Communication. London, Collier-Mac Millan, 1969.
4. Weiss, W.: Mass communication, in Annual Review of Psychology, Vol 23. Stanford, Stanford U. Press, 1971, pp. 309-336.
5. Bandura A.: Imitation of film-mediated aggressive models. Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology 66: 3-11, 1963.
6. Berkowitz L.: Film violence and subsequent aggressive tendencies. Public Opinion Quarterly 27: 217-229, 1963.
7. Feshbach S.: The catharsis effect: research and another view, in Violence and the Media. Edited by Lang D. Washington, Government Printing Office, 1969, pp. 464-472.
8. Morgenstern J.: The new violence. Newsweek March 6, 1972, pp. 66-69.
9. Hovland C. et al: Experiments in Mass Communication. Princeton, Princeton U. Press, 1949.
10. De Fleur M.: Theories of Mass Communication. New York, McKay, 1966.
11. Comstock G. and Rubinstein E.: Television and Social Behavior: A Technical Report to the Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior (in five volumes). Washington, Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1972.
12. Geltner R. (ed): 1971 International Motion Picture Almanac. New York, Quigley, 1970.
13. Geltner R. (ed): 1971 International Television Almanac. New York, Quigley, 1970.
14. Gross L.: What's blue at the movies. Los Angeles Times, West, July 16, 1972, pp. 18-23.
15. Life, August 4, 1972, p.53.
16. Playboy, August, 1972, p. 68.
17. Los Angeles Free Press, August 5, 1972, p. 5.
18. Los Angeles Times, August 6, 1972, Part C, p. 1.
19. Los Angeles Times, June 4, 1972.
20. Los Angeles Times, June 1, 1972, Part I, p.20.
21. Skinner B.: Beyond Freedom and Dignity. New York, Knopf, 1971.